

Koala: A historical biography

by Ann Moyal

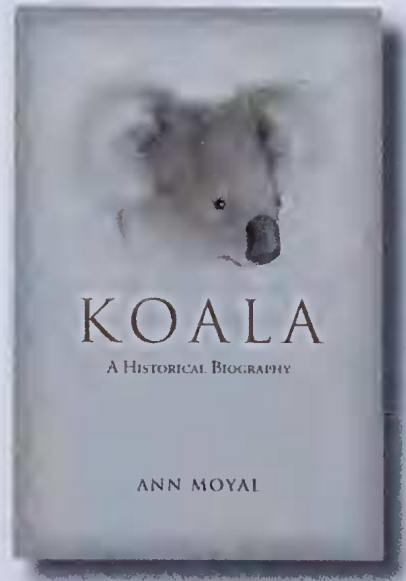
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This book is a captivating narrative that documents the early history of the koala, the perceptions of early Australian settlers about this unique animal, and continues through to the current status of the koala. The book contains many interesting illustrations (mostly in black and white) with early paintings and sketches by naturalists and artists including John Lewin, Ferdinand Bauer, James Stuart, John Gould, Georges Cuvier and William Romaine Govett. There are even some of Norman Lindsay's depictions of the koala as 'Bunyip Bluegum' in *The Magic Pudding*.

The accounts of the early encounters of white man with koalas and aboriginal history are what make this book different from other books about the koala (another narrative-style book was published only one year earlier than this one). It is interesting to know, although probably not hard to believe if you have ever tried searching for a koala yourself, that koalas went undetected for many years following European settlement in Australia. The first encounter appears to be that by Frenchman Francis Barralier in 1802. He noticed his aboriginal guides eating one and traded a tomahawk for the feet!

The first attempts by naturalists and taxonomists to describe the koala; and the study of the koala for medical applications are also well-detailed. The stories about how koalas were caught for study add humour to the book. There was one account of an aborigine climbing a tree with a noose made from bark attached to the end of a pole. He placed the noose around the koala's head and attempted to bring the koala to the ground, much the same as how koalas are caught today. The catchers soon discovered that the apparently 'gentle' koala had extremely sharp claws and even described it as attacking them out of 'spite'. Readers who have helped catch koalas could relate to stories like these.

The book also relates some of the aboriginal legends of koalas, and discusses the debate over



whether aborigines may have contributed to the decline of the koala in Australia by burning habitat and hunting. The narrative continues with the shocking details of the extent of hunting of koalas by white men, and the mostly inadequate protection afforded to koalas by early legislation.

My only criticism of the book is its account of the more recent history of the koala. It provides a very superficial view of what has become a very complex (and often controversial) management issue. Furthermore, many details provided are contradictory to those in scientific publications, which made me wonder about the accuracy of sources used for this component of the book. For example, it was stated that male koalas on Kangaroo Island are being 'inoculated' to make them infertile, yet scientific publications state that the overabundance on the island is being addressed through a program based on the surgical sterilisation of koalas.

Despite this, the book is an enjoyable read and although focused on the koala, paints a colourful picture of the history of discovery of Australia's other wildlife and habitats.

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